

HISTORIC OVERVIEW



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Throughout Lowell's early history, the Downtown has served as a regional center for commerce and industry. Lowell was radically transformed through the growth of the industrial revolution in the 1820s. Downtown Lowell has undergone an equally radical transformation in the past thirty years. The Downtown has slowly shifted from being a center of industry and commerce of the region to become a regional source for culture, education, recreation and tourism —a “Destination City.”



Early View of Downtown Lowell

Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Center for Lowell History

Quotes on the following pages reprinted from Report of the Lowell Historic Canal District Commission, 1977



Workers along the Merrimack Canal at the Moody Street Feeder, 1897
Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Center for Lowell History



Boott Cotton Mills courtyard
Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Center for Lowell History

Development History

Lowell, in particular Downtown Lowell, has undergone dramatic changes in the past two-hundred years. The Lowell Historic Canal District Commission (LHCDC) briefly summarized four distinct time periods in Lowell's history¹. They are as follows:

Early Rural America (Until 1822)

"The site that would become Lowell was characterized by Indian settlements, numerous family-owned farms, and small scale manufacturing along the waterways. Several early canals were built in this area to facilitate the flow of raw materials down the Merrimack River from New Hampshire. The Pawtucket Canal (1796) provided a bypass around the Pawtucket Falls."

While the Pawtucket Canal was under construction, a separate group of entrepreneurs from Boston chose to invest in a separate canal that would extend 27 miles, joining the Merrimack River near Pawtucket and winding all the way to the port of Boston. The Middlesex Canal, completed in 1803, would become the most popular of the canals, as the Pawtucket Canal would later be harvested for the power resources it presented. It wasn't until the early to mid 1800's that the use of the canal as a transportation and shipping source dwindled, thanks in large part to the placement of railroad along the banks of the canal.

Transformation to an Industrial Society (1822-1850)

"The Pawtucket Canal was converted from a transportation canal to become the backbone of an extensive system of power canals. Research and development activities resulted in major technological innovations. Corporations constructed mill complexes with related housing, social institutions, and urban amenities. A factory workforce was recruited largely from among the single daughters of the New England farmers, the famous 'mill girls'. Corporate regulations enforced a lifestyle of discipline, morality, and education among female employees. Early strikes foreshadowed the future development of unions. Lowell grew dramatically, and by 1850 it was the second largest city in Massachusetts and the largest cotton textile center in the nation."

Downtown Lowell fed off the energy of these mills, as the growing number of working class lived and worked in Lowell. In the early days the large number of women that came from throughout New England to work in the mills created a built-in marketplace, as they were making good wages and were often living in housing adjacent to the mills. This eventually would spur development around these clusters, creating the downtown area we

know today, centered between the waterways. The layout of the canal system and major roads within the Downtown such as Merrimack Street, Market Street, Dutton Street and Jackson Street were developed during this time.

Development of an Immigrant City (1850-1920)

"Major waves of immigrants from many origins were attracted to Lowell during this period, and a matrix of strong ethnic neighborhoods developed. Private entrepreneurs constructed tenement housing, and the system of corporate paternalism gradually disappeared as immigrants replaced the "mill girls" as the major source of labor. Many planned urban amenities gave way to denser manufacturing construction, which resulted in the famous "mile of mills" along the Merrimack."

Lowell quickly went from a quiet rural town to a city of over 30,000 people in the span of a couple of decades. The downtown came about out of the need to support this new population. It wasn't until the late 1800's that the city would experience a slip in the powerful grip it had on the textile industry. For several decades after the Civil War, Lowell's textile production had increased steadily, but after 1890 total employment slipped, declining from 17,000 in 1895 to less than 14,000 in 1918². While the employment figures were slashed, the production numbers remained positive due to advances in technology, although the mills were showing the signs of aging.

Decline of the Textile Industry (1920 – 1960)

"The collapse of the New England textile industry resulted in unemployment and economic stagnation. Abandoned industrial buildings came to symbolize the city's decline and some large complexes were demolished. In recent years, many of the surviving industrial structures have been recognized for their historical significance, and converted to non-traditional uses. These structures are now considered to be major artifacts of the industrialization and urbanization of America. Throughout this period, Lowell's ethnic groups have remained strong and cohesive, although the original forces, which drew these people to Lowell, are no longer present."

The industry would see a slight boom during World War I, with federal contracts providing much of the work. Companies began shutting their doors even during the war; however, and by the 1930's several of the founding fathers of the mill industry had abandoned the city. With the depression coming down hard on Lowell, mill employment had dwindled to its lowest figures ever. Buildings were vacant, some being demolished – creating the picture of a war-torn community. That vision wasn't far off, as these economic issues had ravaged the community.



The Lowell Machine Shop, shown above, was shut down in 1928
Lowell Then and Now; Lowell Historic Preservation Commission

World War II again gave the industry a false sense of promise, creating a demand for product and a temporary boon in employment and wages. That boon quickly ended with the end of the war, returning the city to the decline it had been experiencing.

With the promulgation of the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System in the 1950's, it was evident that there wasn't going to be a rebirth of the textile industry in Lowell. The next two decades would see southern states, with plentiful land and infrastructure and highway growth, wooing companies away from the Northeast. Most of these owners, looking for cheaper labor markets, untouched land, and the deals that these hungry states would offer, could not refuse.

Flight to the Suburbs (1960-present)

Increased mobility brought about by the proliferation of highways and the increased use of the automobile has impacted Downtown Lowell's significance as a retail center. The mobility of the automobile moved residents from centralized locations to suburbs, and shopping patterns moved along with this "urban flight." As urban flight occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, suburban residents preferred to shop in strip malls and shopping malls located in the suburbs instead of traditional urban shopping areas. Large downtown department stores quickly vanished in exchange for new forms of suburban shopping.

The phenomenon of motor vehicle ownership has created additional problems for urban areas like Downtown Lowell. Modern industrial processes, which are dependent upon truck transportation for delivery of goods and raw material, find crowded urban areas like Downtown Lowell inferior to spacious urban locations. Also, street and development patterns, laid out before the creation of the automobile, lack sufficient space to park cars and to deal with large amounts of traffic.

The History of Planning in Downtown Lowell

Since the 1960s, there have been many attempts address the decline of center city areas. Downtown Lowell has been no exception. Downtown Lowell has had a long and storied history of people and organizations attempting to revive the economic fortunes of Lowell's Downtown core. Many of these attempts relied on a strong public sector emphasis, ranging from government acquisition of sites through urban renewal to development by and for government agencies and institutions (high school expansion, Tsongas Arena, Middlesex Community College City Campus, etc.). Other strategies utilized a joint public/private approach.

North Canal Urban Renewal Plan (1965)

In the mid-1960s, the City began to recognize its declining fortunes and attempted to solidify its position as a regional center. The City Development Authority commissioned the North Canal Urban Renewal Plan, which proposed to revive Downtown Lowell by creating new, automobile-oriented development opportunities at the edge of the Downtown. The Plan proposed the following elements:

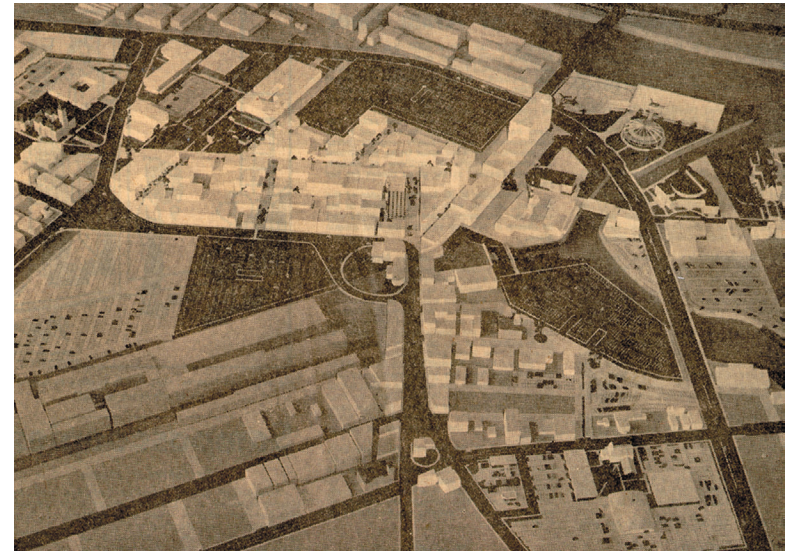
- Demolition of two major mill complexes (Merrimack and Tremont Mills), a number of row houses in and around Dutton Street, and much of the "Little Canada" neighborhood; and
- Improved access to the area by widening roads (French Street/Fr. Morrisette Blvd.), realigning Dutton Street (Arcand Drive) to the North Canal and proposing a downtown connector to I-495.

As a result, access to the North Canal Area was improved and significant redevelopment did occur. New development included the JFK Civic Center, a new US Postal sorting facility, a new manufacturing facility at the current location of the Tsongas Arena, a complex of high-rise residential towers (present day RiverPlace Towers) and a cleared site which decades later would become home of a Lowell High School addition.

Unfortunately, the development that occurred--tall buildings surrounded by a sea of parking lacked a strong physical connection to the traditional core of Downtown Lowell. The 2001 Downtown Lowell Master Plan seeks to fix some of the inadequacies of this very bold strategy.

Central City Study (1971)

This plan, conducted by the City Development Authority, assessed the Downtown's struggle to deal with the effects of suburbanization and mobility. The plan focused on identifying blight and determining the potential for revitalization, economic success and community

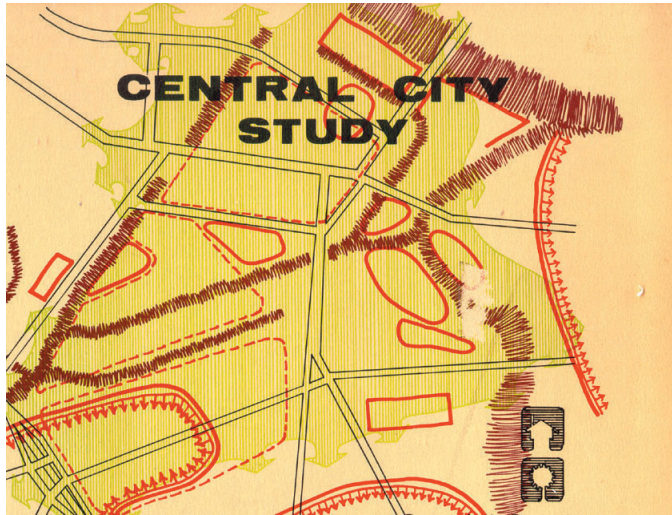


Lowell's Planned Central Artery, 1965



Downtown Lowell site plan shown with a cross-section of 19th Century Lowell
Lowell Historic Canal District Commission

DOWNTOWN LOWELL MASTER PLAN



1972 Central City Study

renewal in Downtown. The plan suggested that Downtown Lowell could compete with suburban developments by emulating these large-scale shopping developments with ample surface parking. The plan recommended that this commercial development should be conducted on a series of large surface parking lots in the Downtown. Overall, the plan felt that these key commercial developments along with the development of a Central City “loop” transportation system would successfully revitalize Downtown Lowell.

Central City Development Study (1972)

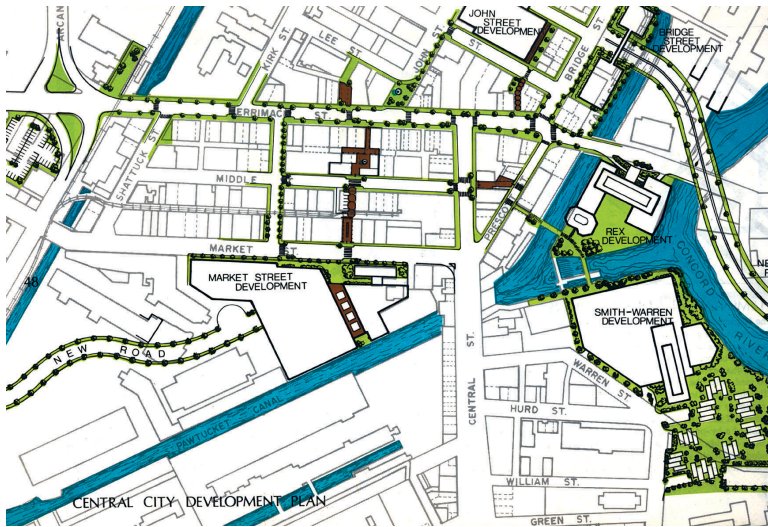
A follow-up to the 1971 Central City Study, the City Development Authority determined how the proposals recommended in the 1971 Central City Study could be carried out in terms of marketability, economic feasibility and design. New roadways in the Downtown to connect French Street to the Lowell Connector and Market Street to Dutton Street were proposed. These roadways were designed to improve the circulation in and out of the Downtown, but not within the Downtown. The plan also proposed the first parking garage in Downtown Lowell at the site of the existing Leo Roy parking garage on Market Street. The study also recommended that large parking lots located at Warren Street, East Merrimack Street, John Street and Bridge Street which would be utilized for major commercial anchors.

Downtown Enhancement through Preservation

A new direction was articulated in the mid-1970s, which suggested that the dense physical fabric and storied industrial history of Lowell was an asset to be preserved and cherished. After a decade of demolition, many encouraged an approach of economic development through historic preservation. The change, however, has been one of highlighting Lowell’s historic past while progressing toward the future. Implementation of this strategy brought forward a host of preservation successes in Downtown Lowell, including the renovation of the Boott Cotton Mills and the Wannalancit Mills into office/research space, Massachusetts Mills and Canal Place into new housing opportunities and the glorious restoration of the Bon Marche Building. Lowell has become a national model of successful development through preservation.

National Park Proposal (1977)

In the mid-1970s, various partners proposed the creation of an urban national park in Downtown Lowell as a response to further physical decay. The National Park Proposal encouraged the preservation of the Downtown, with its rich historic and cultural significance. The proposal was successful and the Lowell National Historic Park was established in the Downtown, signalling the beginning of Lowell’s new approach to revitalization.



Central City Development Plan from the Lowell Community Renewal Program

Millions of Federal dollars have been invested in Downtown Lowell since the establishment of the Park. Many of Lowell's mills and other historic structures that were once considered obsolete were preserved through the financial and technical assistance of the Lowell National Historic Park. The proposal was early to suggest that the economic revitalization of the Downtown could largely be driven by historic preservation.

American City Corporation Studies (1980)

Conducted by the American City Corporation on behalf of the City of Lowell, these studies assessed Downtown Lowell's potential to capture more retail, office and residential development. The studies resulted in the implementation of a highly successful development program in Downtown Lowell. Proposals that were implemented included the creation of a downtown hotel at Warren Street, a new parking garage at John Street, office development at Boott Mills, a residential development in Mass Mills, and a park at the existing Kerouac Park site. However, one emphasis of the study, the renovation and expansion of the Jordan Marsh department store, failed to occur.

Downtown Lowell Action Plan (1995)

Authored by the Lowell Center City Committee, this plan advocated improvements to five major components: retail development, transportation, community building, marketing and public safety. The plan suggested that methods for recruiting, training and improving Downtown businesses should be examined; that the Lowell Police Department should have a more active presence in the Downtown; that streets should be more pedestrian friendly; and that an aggressive marketing campaign should be undertaken for Downtown Lowell. The plan helped to lay the groundwork for a number of initiatives undertaken in the 1990s, including the creation of the Lowell Small Business Assistance Center and the Center City Farmer's Market.

North Canal Economic Development Strategy (1993-2000)

On the heels of a significant region-wide economic recession in the early 1990s, a number of high profile projects were envisioned to help Lowell further refine its image. The strategy consisted of a number of large public improvements designed to position Lowell as a regional center for entertainment. Major investments include the Paul E. Tsongas Arena, which plays host to the American Hockey League's Lowell Lock Monsters, the UMASS Lowell River Hawks hockey team, concerts, family shows, trade shows and conferences. The venue sits by the Merrimack River, as does the home of the Boston Red Sox-affiliated Lowell Spinners – LeLaucheur Stadium. The new stadium, arena and Riverwalk, which connects the two venues, represented a major investment made by the City and the Commonwealth in Lowell. These investments sought to change the image of



One of downtown Lowell's finest preservation jewels: the Bon Marché Building.

Photo: Higgins & Ross

Boardinghouse Park; a recent Lowell National Historic Park investment.

Photo: Higgins & Ross



the city and enhance the tourism and retail base of Downtown Lowell. While the strategy is universally recognized as a success, the lack of physical connections between this area and Downtown Lowell has limited the effect upon the Downtown Core.

Downtown Retail Studies (1988 - 1999)

The City and various of its partners have conducted numerous studies to determine how and which new retail stores could be attracted to the Downtown. Most recently, the City contracted with the firm of Todreas Handley to create a retail plan to attract businesses to the Downtown. As part of the 1998 Downtown Retail Master Plan, the firm suggested a comprehensive management plan to stimulate retail activity. Other suggestions included: hiring a real estate firm to comprehensively lease retail storefronts, increasing marketing efforts; and providing incentives to lower the cost of starting up retail concepts. Subsequent retail recruiting efforts led by the firm failed to attract new retailers. Failure was due to a lack of space available for retailers and lack of cooperation by landlords.